

## The Buddha's vision of Human life

- the need today to re-discover it.

[Vesak talk 2007]

To-day, Śākyamuni Gotama goes by the name Buddha or Sammā Sambuddha because he is believed to have totally comprehended the painful continuance of human life through time and space, i.e. through birth again after death and that followed by birth and death again and again in different planes of existence, terrestrial and otherwise. And also that he found an infallible solution to its guaranteed termination in Nirvana, with no more possibility of rebirth [*ayaṃ antimā jāti natthi 'dāni punabbhavo* = This is my last birth. There shall be no more being born again for me.], in any form anywhere. The Buddha is also said to have stressed that this is achieved through man's own personal endeavour and application alone, with no assistance from elsewhere, by each one for oneself.

To the Buddhist, there can be no two words about human life being painful. Certainly not if one had set eyes, even once, on the Buddha's own words. *Pubbe c'āhaṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañ c'eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ* [Alagaddūpama Sutta at MN. I. 140]. This means ` O monks, formerly as well as now, I preach about *dukkha* and its cessation, To live a Buddhist life in earnest or to talk about Buddhism to others in any meaningful way or write learned articles about it, one needs to undertake a serious and honest study of the religion. For this, one must not, whether monk or lay person, male or female, miss being told by one's competent and reliable supervisors of studies [if one ever had any] that one needs to possess a reasonably good knowledge of the Pali language. It is all the more important that professionals from diverse walks of life who, on their retirement take to Buddhist studies, realize the importance of this language equipment. Its absence, and that without a competent academic guide, is a very much more perilous than groping in the dark. As one becomes serious about

one's task and one wishes to safeguard one's statements from being challenged and questioned about their correctness any where or at any time, one must also develop an adequate sense of seriousness about the authenticity of the sources one uses, primary, secondary or tertiary, of monk or of layman. Neglect of these to-day is seen leading to disastrous results.

Today, the authenticity of what is believed to be the original Canonical Pali texts, containing the words of the Master as he himself delivered them, is virtually no body's concern. Chronological stratification of ideas through time, at times over periods of hundreds of years or more, is not reckoned with, not even by academics at university levels, as for instance when early Canonical texts like the Digha and Majjhima Nikayas are placed side by side with the Milindapanha in relation to ideas expressed. Deflections of basic and primary Buddhist thinking and their deviations in the later Commentarial tradition also often go unnoticed and unquestioned.

Next come errors in the translations of these millennia-old Pali texts. These errors are certainly pardonable, specially when they occur in the hands of those honest pioneers of the western world who brought to the surface these high-priced gems of Buddhist thinking, lying buried deep under debris of time, for the benefit of the English speaking world. Hats off to them for the monumental work they have done nearly a hundred years ago, or even more. The lament is that no succeeding generation of Pali scholarship in Sri Lanka has hardly set eyes on these disastrous howlers.

The result of this serious omission is as one would naturally expect. Generations of lamentably ill-equipped and inadequately supervised researchers as well as self-nurtured preachers and writers on Buddhism have worked with these incorrect translations, without suspecting any danger. Massive post-graduate theses and many more impressive new-look books on Buddhism have been produced based on these, thus laying the foundation in many parts of the

world for building up unthinkable new Buddhist theories which are completely unacceptable in the light of what have to be accepted as authentic early Buddhist teachings of the Master. We maintain that such incongruous ideas are seen lying embedded in many writings on Buddhism, both in English and Sinhala, written both by Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars. They also come from many parts of the world, even from Buddhist countries besides Sri Lanka, quite often reinforced by hard-crusted teacher-pupil monastic traditions.

To-day, it is our considered opinion that the time is right now for serious re-examination of these long-perpetuated howlers and heresies. World scholarship needs to awaken to this crying need of the day, ignoring petty loyalties to groups and creeds, and to their propounders springing up from time to time. We propose to undertake, as best as we can, a continuous series of serious re-examination of such errors of the diverse types we have mentioned such as mis-translations and mis-interpretations as well as instances of chronological misplacements and displacements.

Our methodology is to begin with the historical genesis of Buddhist thinking, tracing them back to their earliest appearance in recognizably authentic texts, at times even in the hands of the yet un-enlightened Buddha-aspirant or *bodhisatta* himself. These are clearly located in early authentic texts in statements like the following. *Pubbe'va me bhikkhave sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhisattass' eva sato etadahosi. Kicchaṃ vat'āyaṃ loko āpanno jāyati ca jīyati ca mīyati ca cavati ca uppajjati ca. Atha ca pan'imassa dukkhassa nissaraṇaṃ nappajānāti jarā-maraṇassa. Kudā'ssu nāma imassa dukkhassa nissaraṇaṃ paññāyissati jarāmarāṇassā' ti* [SN. II.10]. Here it is in English: ` O monks. Prior to my enlightenment, while I was still the unenlightened Buddha-Aspirant, an idea like this occurred to me. Mankind is plunged in a disastrous predicament in being born, passing through growth and decay, and dying, and in passing from this life to another and being born again. But nobody knows a way out of this misery of decay and death. When will a way out of this misery of decay and death be

known?'

This statement, we believe, is reminiscent of our Śākyamuni's pre-enlightenment vision, with a time-space vastness of its own, of the human life process. He encompasses the totality of this within what he calls the world or *loko*, i.e. the life process of the human, saying that it is caught up within a dreadful predicament [*kicchaṃ vat'āyaṃ loko āpanno*] between birth and death, i.e. *jāyati, jīyati, mīyati* in the first instance, and equally well its continuance or recurrence after death, i.e. *cavati* and *uppajjati*. This concept of transmigration was well known among the Indians even at the time of the Buddha [*mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyuṃ āpnoti ya iha nān'eva paśyati*]. Thus it must become clear even to a child-student of Buddhism that Buddhism basically swings around the twin concepts of ills of *saṃsāra* [and not of one birth only], i.e. *dukkha* and release out of it, i.e. *nirodha*. Thus all analyses and explanations in Buddhist thinking have to take note of the *saṃsāric* dimension in relation to the human living process.

Keeping in mind the present visible life process of the human, Buddhist teachings primarily begin with its genesis through down to earth parental union, referring to it as *mātā-ṭṭika-saṃbhavo.....translation.....* This physical union of a parental sperm and ova, resulting in what is referred to as the zygote, is viewed in Buddhism as only the commencement of a new life process [but by no means a product as a complete human] for the generation of a new individual in the *saṃsāric* journeying which is called *bhava*, which in turn, leads to a birth in a new life form via *jāti*.

Buddhist texts are very specific about the invariable second component [which is referred to as *viññāṇa*] which needs to come from outside, to be united with the zygote to set in motion the psycho-physical growth process of this half-formed human foetus. The growth of the six sense organs or *saḷāyatana* and the associated sensory activity or *phassa* begins only with this union. The Mahānidāna Sutta [DN.II. 55 ff.], we feel, is the most comprehensive study of the

behaviour and function of the Paṭicca-samuppāda as a major item of Buddhist teachings which explains, without a shadow of doubt, the *saṃsāric* continuance of the human individual as well as its termination.

In this sutta, the Buddha is seen trying to clarify the depth and profundity of the teachings of the Paṭicca-samuppāda to Ananda who thought light of it, saying that it appears very clear to him [*Atha ca pana me uttānuttānuttānako viya khāyatī tī*].....**translation**..... The Buddha firmly tells Ananda that lack of knowledge about the real nature and function of the Paṭiccasamuppāda [*Etassa dhammassa an-anubodhā a-ppaṭivedhā*]....**translation**..... leads people of the world to utter confusion [*ayaṃ pajā tantākulaka-jātā*]....**translation**..... and are unable to get beyond and out of this painfully degrading disastrous *saṃsāra* [*apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ saṃsāraṃ nātivattati*].....**translation**.....

It does not require much clever writing to convince the reader that the teachings of the Paṭiccasamuppāda as presented in the Mahānidāna Sutta clearly indicate its *saṃsāric* relevance and its *saṃsāric* applicability. Besides the very clear and unambiguous phrase *saṃsāraṃ nātivattati* which means 'does not get beyond the cyclical process of life continuance', all other associated Pali words like *apāya*, *duggati* and *vinipāta* all imply possible degraded states of existence into which one can slip during one's journeying beyond death [*cavati ca uppallati ca*].....**translation**..... This trance-*saṃsāric* journeying is implied in the verb *cavati* which lies in our earlier quote between *mīyati* [dies] and *uppajjati* [is born]. Thus it becomes clear that human life is to be viewed as ceaselessly continuing in *saṃsāra*, until finally terminated in Nirvana.

On the other hand, it is to be clearly understood that its complete cessation or *nirodha* in Nirvana, being a personal individual achievement, does take place during one's living reality, the required process of culture being completed here and now [*upādāna-nirodhā bhava-nirodho* as well as *anupādā pari-nibbānaṃ*].....**translation**..... It is a state of *jīvan mukti* or liberation while one is

living. It is not a state to be consummated after one's physical death. It is by no means *videha mukti*.

This does not by any means imply that the total operation of the series in the Paṭiccasamuppāda does take place or has to take place, i.e. begin and end, during one single life time of an individual being. On the other hand, the Paṭiccasamuppāda process is seen to be operating ceaselessly through one's saṃsāric continuance, until its termination in Nirvana. The process begins its activity in one life time [we begin here for a convenient point of start], commencing from one's pre-natal genesis as the zygote. This parentally contributed foetal human body which the Buddhist texts identify as *nāma-rūpa* within the mother, i.e. the *mātu-kucchi* [which does accommodate both the womb of the mother and the Fallopian tube where the genesis of life could begin] has to get coupled with an invariable saṃsāric continuant which is an individual's psychic component called *viññāṇa*.

As is positively indicated in the above quoted Mahānidāna Sutta, this *nāma-rūpa* which is already within the mother has to be backed by the incoming saṃsāric consciousness, to commence the process of growth of the human individual within the human mother. Note the Mahānidāna Sutta statement about the incoming consciousness which is clearly recorded as follows: *Viññāṇaṃ va hi Ānanda mātu kucchim na okkamissatha api nu kho nāma-rūpaṃ mātu-kucchismiṃ samucchassathā 'ti* at DN. II. 63. This means 'If this consciousness does not descend into the womb of the mother, O Ananda, will the foetal body, i.e. the zygote commence its growth'? It is after the arrival of this incoming consciousness that the physical component of *nāma-rūpa* which is already within the mother comes to be activated for its sequential [*paccayā*] growth of sense organs: *viññāṇa-paccayā nāma-rūpaṃ nāma-rūpa-paccayā saḷ-āyatanaṃ*: Consciousness activates name and form, name and form activates six sense organa.

It is this coupling together of the physical parental contribution of *nāma-rūpa* within the mother, with the incoming psychic *saṃsāric* component, diversely called *saṃvattanika viññāṇa* or *viññāṇa-sota* which heralds the commencement of every new human life within the Saṃsāric process. This is when and where the seeds of *jāti* are thus well sown, propelled by preceding factors of *taṇhā paccayā upādānaṃ upādāna-paccayā bhavo bhava-paccayā jāti*, i.e. craving generates grasping, grasping generates saṃsāric continuance and saṃsāric continuance gives rise to birth in a new life form [this being what is unmistakably stated in the Paṭiccasamuppāda] that the growth of real human life begins. This is and has to be the first beginning of a new human life of every individual. This force, no doubt, is the Saṃsāra-continuant which is referred to as *gandabba* [or more correctly the *gantabba* i.e. the one who has to go on in *saṃsāra*]. It is only on the total exhaustion of the life-generative force called *bhava*, i.e. *bhava-nirodhā* that *jāti* or birth would be ended: *bhava-nirodhā jāti nirodho*: on the exhaustion of life-generative force, birth would be ended. Therefore this *gandabba* or *gantabba* undoubtedly is the link between a life which has preceded and a life which leads into a new existence. That is why its presence is declared a vital ingredient for the genesis of a new human life [*gandabbo ca paccupaṭṭhito hoti* = a saṃsāra-goer is also available on the scene].

With this very clear textual indication of the trans-saṃsāric inter-relationship of each individual item of the Paṭiccasamuppāda to one another, both for the continuance of the human life process within saṃsāra as well as for its very termination at any appropriate point during a single phase of life, any attempt to turn one's back on the time sequence of past, present and future in terms of saṃsāric evolution, or religio-cultural development within it or the consequent release out of it here or hereafter, appears to us no more than a Quixotic adventure.

The earliest signs of the emergence of the concept of Paṭiccasamuppāda in Buddhism are clearly seen in the pre-enlightenment vision of our *bodhisatta* [i.e.

Śākyamuni as the Buddha aspirant] which are recorded in the Saṃyutta Nikaya [SN. II. 10]. His candid remarks about the human predicament, about what man goes through from birth to death and what follows him ceaselessly thereafter, we have already referred to above.

It makes absolutely no sense whatsoever for clever writers to ambitiously say that they offer a new or newer interpretation to the Paṭiccasamuppāda, relating the totality of its relevance to one single life time, opening as it were, newer windows from out side, without even attempting to see and know where the main entrance to the building is. It is known to everybody who needs to know it that the concept of rebirth was known to the Indians of the Buddha's day. The Buddha was not to make the mistake of carrying coal to New Castle. The Buddhist scholars, monks or laymen, need to seriously know that the Buddha, however had a very different how and why about his own concept of rebirth, what generates it and how one could bring about an end of it, very different from the Hindus. His own awareness of rebirth made him offer to the world a completely different version of rebirth. That is the genesis of the Buddha's theory of Paṭiccasamuppada or causal genesis of the human, and therefore necessarily also of its termination.

Here is a bit of what some neo-thinkers on Buddhism groundlessly endeavour to say:

There was no need for the Buddha to give proof of rebirth soon after Enlightenment, since the Hindus believed in rebirth long before the Buddha. Rebirth is therefore not a new concept.

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We have already indicated above the folly and the danger of such sweeping statements, made about both Buddhism and about Indian religions, without adequate knowledge of the subject and without awareness and judgement.



Having indicated over and over again the need for the Buddhists and the non-Buddhists to know thoroughly the vastness of the Saṃsāric dimension of Buddhism which is referred to as inconceivable with regard to its beginning [*anavataggā'yaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro pubbā koṭi na paññāyati* = Infinite indeed is this Saṃsāra whose first beginnings are hardly discernible], the Buddha rightly feels the need to take a single phase of it, i.e. one life time of a single human from birth to death and detail out its psycho-physical operation during one's living process from birth to death. This is the operational theory of the *pañcakkhandha* or the Five Aggregates. It should be clear to every serious student of Buddhism that these two items, the Paṭiccasamuppāda theory and the Pañcakkhandha analysis have to be jointly handled to get an adequate comprehension of the continuous life process of the human in Saṃsāra.

The five aggregates of the *pañcakkhandha* are 1. *rūpa* = material visible form of the human body, 2. *vedanā* = first stage preliminary sensory awareness of the external world [In this series we do not take *vedanā* to be judged feelings of *sukha*, *dukkha*, and *adukkhamasukhā*], 3. *saññā* = more precise cognitive awareness, with certainty of identity, 4. *saṅkhāra* = sequentially acquired rebirth potential [from one life to the next in the Paṭiccasamuppāda series, presumably embracing within it diverse psychic processes like *taṇhā*, *upādāna* and *bhava*. Finally we have in the list as item no. 5. *viññāṇa* = Consciousness. Please note that we translate this consciousness with a capital C because we give this *viññāṇa* the major complementary role of playing side by side with *rūpa* in the composition of the human individual as consisting of *Nāma-rūpa* + *Viññāṇa*. In this vital interplay of being *aññamañña-paccaya* as in *viññāṇa-paccayā nāmarūpaṃ nāmarūpa-paccayā viññāṇaṃ* But we do not fail to notice that in the cognitive process of the living individual